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A Conversation With Filmmaker: Melvin Van Peebles

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WRITTEN BY KAM WILLIAMS

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Born in Chicago on August 21, 1932, Melvin Van Peebles is best known as the incendiary iconoclast who financed, wrote, produced, scored, edited, distributed and starred in "Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song" (1971) the politically-progressive picture which single-handedly inspired the rise of the blaxploitation genre. What few folks realize, however, is that moviemaking was only a fraction of this Renaissance man's many talents.

"How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (And Enjoy It)", a retrospective on the versatile maverick's entire career, reveals a man who also spent time as a novelist (in French), playwright, composer, painter, astronomer, enlisted man in the Air Force, and as a stock trader with a seat on the American Exchange on Wall Street. Last year, Van Peebles started doing shows in NYC with members of Burnt Sugar, under the name **Melvin Van Peebles wid Laxative**. In November, 2011, **Melvin Van Peebles wid Laxative** performed his song *Love, that's America* at Zebulon Cafe Concert, two weeks after the venue showcased the original video for this single involving Occupy Wall Street footage, which was uploaded to YouTube in October 2011.

In speaking with blackfilm.com, Peebles shares his thoughts with me on just about everything and his documentary "How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company".

[This interview was conducted in 2006]

KW: Hey, Melvin **[Peebles]**, thanks for the time.

MVP: No problemo.

KW: Congratulations on your new movie, and recent lifetime achievement awards, even if, in my opinion, the recognition is a bit overdue.

MVP: Thanks, I'm really a happy camper, as they say.

KW: Do you still have your seat on the American Stock Exchange?

MVP: No longer. Unless you're going to be there continually, you don't want to keep your seat because, first of all, it costs, but also, doing stocks is not something you can phone in. You got to do it right, otherwise.

KW: Were you one of those guys you see on the floor gesturing frantically?

MVP: No, I was a trader for a company. That's different from the brokers who we sort of disdain as sort of just errand boys.

KW: So, how did you spend your time on Wall Street?

MVP: I had to do the mathematical calculations to arrive at whether I was going to buy or sell.

KW: and you were successful enough at it to write about the market.

MVP: I wrote a technical book about how to trade options.

KW: Of which of your achievements are you most proud?

MVP: I like all of them.

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KW: How to "Eat Your Watermelon in White Company" shows you to be so much more than simply the actor who played Sweetback. To me, your contribution as a trailblazing director and producer is of equal importance.

MVP: Normally, if I'm being acknowledged it is for something in front of the camera. This puts the spotlight on the fact that there are opportunities other than just being an actor. That's what I think our kids sorely need to know.

KW: In my opinion, "Sweet Sweetback" was a groundbreaking film, not only because it was filled with Black characters, but because of the picture's progressive political point-of-view.

MVP: But not just the film itself was groundbreaking, also the fact that it was made by an African-American without the help of Hollywood. This was before the rise of the independent era. The studios didn't really take independent films seriously, until Sweetback was such a financial success. At that juncture, what came from that was not only what they call blaxploitation, but also the independent film. That's all very important. Just as you said, you think of me mostly from that early era. And that's what I really find so touching, because nothing happens outside of a historical context. No film is made without the people behind the lens. Of course, most people, even I, tend to look at films in the most simplistic way, and say, "Wow, so-and-so is in this film." We talk about who's in it, as opposed to who got it made. But there are financial and technical aspects which go along with it, that should be addressed and acknowledged, including those minorities who are doing excellent work as well.

KW: When I was majoring in Black Studies at Cornell, I remember a professor praising Sweet Sweetback's positive political perspective, which was so different from all the blaxploitation flicks which followed which were just new version of Stepin' Fetchit coon shows.

MVP: That was why the Black Panthers made it mandatory viewing for all of their members, for its political content. While that's an immense aspect, you have to remember that if I didn't have control of what was going on BEHIND the lens, I could never have gotten what you saw IN FRONT OF the lens.

KW: I remember seeing your play, "Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death" and being so moved by Minnie Gentry's [Terrence Howard's grandmother] closing soliloquy, where she said, "May all your children end up junkies, too!"

MVP: That was called, "Put a Curse on You!" That curse has actually come to pass. At one time, the general consensus was that only the African community was considered to be plagued by drug problems. People thought, "Well, it's just a problem among those porch monkeys. It couldn't happen in our community." Yeah, right. It has since spread out and become huge all over the country.

KW: Movies, Broadway plays, you did it all and on your own terms.

MVP: Yes, but once again, remember that the hard part was the business and technical side. People really, really, really need to understand that, and believe that it can be done. You can take your own destiny. I want people to say, "Hmmm, I never thought of that. Gee, I guess so."

KW: What inspired you to try to make your first movie?

MVP: One day, I was sitting in a movie theater, and I said, "What the hell, I can do better than that."

KW: Are you still running? I met you back in 1979 when I came over and introduced myself at the starting line of the Boston Marathon. How'd you do that day?

MVP: I broke three hours. That day I was 2:57.

KW: That's incredible. I finished in 4 hours and 18 minutes that day. Are you still running?

MVP: I did seven miles this morning. I ran all the way across Manhattan and the 59th Street Bridge. It was pretty steep going and the wind was blowing hard in my face. I thought at least I'll have the wind when I need it on my way back. Don't you know that after I ran around Queens, and got back to the bridge, the wind had shifted and was blowing in my face again. I said, "Man, this racist wind out here."

KW: Have you run the New York Marathon, too? My wife ran it a couple of years ago.

MVP: Oh, yeah, but I don't like New York anymore because I hate all that waiting at the Verrazano Bridge. I just get too cold.

KW: You should be in that contingent of world-class and celebrity runners, like Diddy, that they give special treatment to and place at the front.

MVP: No, you don't want special treatment when you're very serious about it, though I guess for my age-bracket, I'm pretty good. Still, Boston is the one, brother. That's the great one. I also enjoy the Buffalo to Niagara Falls Marathon. And Philly's nice. But if you asked me my favorite, I suppose I'd have to say Boston.

KW: You must eat very healthily to keep up this demanding regimen at your age. Do you have a special health food diet?

MVP: That depends on whether you consider neck bones health food. Personally, I'm into Uncle Ben's and fat.

KW: How did you like "How to Get the Man's Foot Outta Your Ass," the biopic your son, Melvin, made about you?

MVP: I was bowled over by it. I thought it was just terrific. And the interesting thing was, it was all true. It brought back some very tense memories there, boy.



KW: You had already made "Watermelon Man" with Columbia Pictures when you made "Sweet Sweetback". So, wasn't making a militant film a risky move for you?

MVP: Very. I had a three picture deal with Columbia that I lost. And nobody's offered me a job since.

KW: So, it really set back your career

MVP: Oh well, what the heck. It doesn't particularly bother me.

KW: But didn't it have an effect on your life?

MVP: Oh, it had a major effect. For a long time, there were assassination attempts and all that good stuff. Okay, if you can't stand the heat in the oven, what are you supposed to do? I mean, I was born and bred in the briar patch. I'm from the Southside of Chicago. So, it was no big deal. [laughs]

KW: Isn't it ironic though, as someone who was so targeted by the mainstream and the government as a threat to be embraced by the Establishment?

MVP: Hey, look at how we have *Martin Luther King Day* now, and how did he go?

KW: Even as feared a figure as Malcolm X eventually got his own stamp.

MVP: It's all very classic. I'm not so surprised. They say possession is 9/10ths of the law. I say survival is 10/10ths of the law. And I always felt that one day my contributions would come to the forefront.

KW: Yeah, sooner or later, and you're getting the last laugh now.

MVP: It may seem soon to you, but when you're waiting, brother, it doesn't seem all that rapid, if you know what I mean. [laughs heartily, sighs]

KW: What question would you love for someone to ask you that nobody ever asks? Is there any question I haven't asked that you would like for me to ask?

MVP: No, I really like to talk to people and to get their take on things. This has been very instructive. While we've been talking, you've shared your impressions and I find that fascinating, because you mustn't forget that essentially, I'm, most of all, a writer. So, what makes people tick interests me, and I appreciate your questions.

KW: Well, I appreciate that you are sharing your time, your wisdom, your reminiscences and your sage insights about the industry. And in case I haven't already, I want to express my gratitude for all your seminal contributions which changed the course of cinema history for black folks, opening doors and creating opportunities for many who have come behind you. And though I feel that many owe you a debt of gratitude, I don't mean to suggest that "Sweet Sweetback" is in the same genre as the blaxploitation era it inspired.

MVP: It's not. It's a revolutionary film. What happened when Sweetback made all that money, the studios were in a very difficult position. They wanted the money, but they didn't like the message. This marked the advent of the caricatures which became known as blaxploitation. Hollywood realized that they were totally unfamiliar with black vernacular, so they had to hire some Black people which meant the beginning of some job opportunities to do the costumes, the sets, etcetera. And now we're slowly beginning to see some of the fruits of that.

KW: Thanks again, bro, I guess we've got everything covered.

MVP: Yes, see you in Boston!

Van Peebles in brief

Born	August 21, 1932 (age 79) Chicago, Illinois, USA
Other names	Brer Soul
Education	B.A. in 1953, Ohio Wesleyan University

Occupation Actor, director, screenwriter,
playwright, composer

**Years
active** 1955–present



Photo Credit: The Independent Film Festival of Boston

Filmography

As director

- *Pickup Men for Herrick* (short, 1957) also writer and composer
- *Sunlight* (short, 1957) also writer, composer and producer
- *Cinq cent balles* (short, 1963) also writer and composer
- *The Story of a Three-Day Pass* (also known as *La Permission*, 1967) also writer, from his novel *La Permission*, and composer
- *Watermelon Man* (1970) also composer
- *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) also actor, writer, composer, co-producer and editor
- *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1973) also writer, from his book *Harlem Party* and stage musical *Don't Play Us Cheap*, and composer
- *Identity Crisis* (1989) also actor, producer and editor
- *Vroom Vroom Vroooooom* (segment from *Tales of Erotica*, also known as *Erotic Tales*, 1996) also writer, composer, producer and editor
- *Gang in Blue* (1996) co-director, actor and producer
- *Le Conte du ventre plein* (also known as *Bellyful*, 2000) also writer, composer and delegate producer
- *Confessionsofa Ex-Doofus-ItchyFooted Mutha* (2008)

Other writing credits

- *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971 Broadway musical book and score)
- *Just an Old Sweet Song* (also known as *Down Home*, Robert Ellis Miller, 1976) made for television; screenwriter and theme song
- *Greased Lightning* (Michael Schultz, 1977) screenwriter
- *The Sophisticated Gents* (Harry Falk, 1981) made for television; actor, screenwriter, song "Greased Lightning" and producer
- *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (Gilbert Moses, 1987) made for television; screenwriter
- *Panther* (Mario Van Peebles, 1995) based on his novel *Panther*, screenwriter, actor and producer
- *Melvin Van Peebles' Classified X* (Mark Daniels, 1998) documentary; screenwriter, actor and executive producer)
- *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: The Musical* (2008) writer, singer
- *Unmitigated Truth: Life, a Lavatory, Loves, and Ladies* (2009) writer, performer

Other acting-only credits

- *O.C. and Stiggs* (Robert Altman, 1987) actor
- *Jaws: The Revenge* (Joseph Sargent, 1987) actor
- *Sonny Spoon* (1988) television series; actor

- *Posse* (Mario Van Peebles, 1993) actor
- *Terminal Velocity* (Deran Sarafian, 1994) actor
- *Fist of the North Star* (Asher, 1995) actor
- *The Shining* (Mick Garris, 1997) television movie; actor
- *The Hebrew Hammer* (Jonathan Kesselman, 2003) actor

Plays

- *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death* (writer, 1972)
- *Don't Play Us Cheap* (writer, 1972)
- *Waltz of the Stork* (actor, writer, 1982)

Discography

Studio albums

- *Brer Soul* (1969)
- *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death* (1970)
- *As Serious As A Heart-Attack* (1974)
- *What the.... You Mean I Can't Sing?!* (1974)
- *Ghetto Gothic* (1995)

Soundtrack albums

- *Watermelon Man* (1970)
- *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971)
- *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death* (1972)
- *Don't Play Us Cheap* (1973)

Bibliography

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- *Un Ours pour le F.B.I.* (1964); *A Bear for the F.B.I.* Trident, 1968.
- *Un Americain en enfer* (1965); *The True Americain*. Doubleday, 1976.
- *Le Chinois du XIV* (1966). (short stories)
- *La Fete a Harlem (Harlem Party)* (1967). (novel)
- *La Permission*, (1967)
- *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Lancer Books, New York 1971.
- *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*. Bantam, New York 1973.
- *Don't Play Us Cheap: A Harlem Party*. Bantam Books, New York 1973.
- *Just an Old Sweet Song*. Ballantine, New York 1976.
- *Bold Money: A New Way to Play the Options Market*. Warner Books, New York 1986 (nonfiction)
- Melvin and (his son) Mario Van Peebles: *No Identity Crisis*. A Fireside Book, Simon & Shuster, New York 1990
- "Blood Money or Money and Bloods" in *Black Genius: African American Solutions to African American Problems* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2000)

Source: www.wikipedia.org

About the author of this interview: Kam Williams is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean. He is a member of the New York Film Critics Online, the NAACP Image Awards Nominating Committee, and Rotten Tomatoes. He is a contributor to TheLoop21.com, eurweb.com and so on. He is also a columnist for our Web Magazine www.megadiversities.com. Some of Williams' articles are translated into Chinese. In 2008, he was voted Most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the Disilgold Soul Literary Review. Kam Williams is an erudite Lawyer who holds four degrees: a BA in Black Studies from Cornell University, an MA in English from Brown University, an M.B.A. from The Wharton School and a J.D. from Boston University. Kam Williams is a member of the Bar in NJ, NY, CT, PA, MA & US Supreme Court bars. He lives in Princeton (New Jersey) with his wife and son. Kam Williams can be reached at kwilliams@megadiversities.com.

